

From PowerPoint Slides to Powerful Stories

by Dr. Alexander Laufer

An experienced NASA project manager was invited to talk at a Knowledge Sharing (KS) meeting sponsored by the Academy of Program and Project Leadership (APPL). Not used to speaking about his work in front of his peers, i.e., other NASA project managers, our project manager did not sleep well all week prior to the meeting. His wife, who had always been a balm to him in times of stress, tried to comfort him by pointing out how well he'd done in his presentations in front of the directors at his center. This was true, he was known at the center to be a terrific front man for any project he worked on, but in this case it was little comfort.

Again, his wife tried to help by assisting him with his presentation. If not an IT expert, she was certainly better than he was with PowerPoint, and thanks to her his slides looked great. "Give me a grocery list," she liked to say, "and I can make a presentation of it."

The trouble was, and he could see it was difficult for her to understand, the best looking presentation in the world would not have made a difference in alleviating his concern about speaking in front of this group. At the meeting he would be speaking to other project managers, 15 in all, "the best of the best," as the meeting organizers like to say of the project managers they invite.

"It's not just the audience," he tried to explain. "There's a difference in the kind of energy in the room when someone tells a story instead of using a slide presentation."

She looked puzzled. "But we've got PowerPoint! It's the new beta version."

He had spent what he realized was an "unhealthy" amount of time on the presentation, preparing the slides, editing them until he could not stand looking at them any longer, practicing his delivery in front of his whole family, including his young children and even his poor dog. It's funny because our project manager had such a good time participating in other KS meetings. He enjoyed listening to other project managers tell stories about their projects, and he never lacked for his own examples to bring up in his remarks to them either in the large or small group discussions.

During the first part of the meeting, our project manager found it difficult to concentrate on the other presentations. Looking around the room, he recognized the nametags around the horseshoe-shaped table as some of the best project managers in NASA. Some of them in fact were veritable superstars.

When he took his seat at the horseshoe in the conference room, he was wishing he had not been so quick to accept the offer to present. When asked to talk about his recent project, he got excited and said yes right away. All sorts of ideas sprung to mind to talk about, but as he began thinking about them as a coherent narrative he



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saw his experience as something very different from what occurs on most projects, hardly something common enough to spark a meaningful group discussion. To make matters worse, the presentation was going to concern some of the difficulties involved during a project, and though he had heard others talk about difficulties on their projects, he didn't want people to think these difficulties were all that the project was about.

As he listened to his peers from other NASA centers share their experiences, the project manager looked across the room at another project manager from his center. They flew in together to the meeting and on the plane he was surprised to hear his colleague sound so pessimistic about the meeting, although it was clear soon enough that this was the colleague's first time attending a KS meeting.

"What can anybody really get out of listening to a bunch of people tell stories!" his colleague grouched. "All I'm interested in is the lessons and tools. I hear they have a website where they publish all the stories. For my money, it would be a better use of everyone's time if we all just read the material on the web and sent emails to each other." Then he snorted. "I mean like who really wants to talk about a story."

After grouching some more about how he wished the meeting were being held somewhere else, preferably where he could pack in a half a day of good skiing, the colleague asked him what his presentation was going to be about. When our project manager named the project, the colleague remarked, "Oh yeah, I heard all about that and the stuff you and your team had to go through to complete it on schedule. Amazing you ever pulled it off."

What should have sounded like a vote of confidence, our project manager heard as a challenge. During those awful nights, those sleepless nights just before leaving for the meeting, he thought about any possible way to make the presentation more interesting, and as he ransacked his memory for details, little bits of humor and specific detail about the project, he wasn't sure if anyone would be able to generalize from his unique experience.

Suddenly it was time for our project manager to get up and speak. He was introduced as one of the most dynamic project managers at his center. He felt a little embarrassed being introduced this way but the faces in the crowd looked expectant, not incredulous, and this steadied him as he walked to the front of the room.

The first part of the presentation went exactly as planned, but it felt all wrong. His delivery seemed wooden, it sounded too scripted, and so he decided to abandon the slides altogether and tell stories he had not rehearsed nor planned on sharing. As he told these stories, he grew more relaxed, the words came out so much easier, and

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soon he was enjoying himself. Was it his imagination or did people look more interested in what he was saying?

Someone laughed at a little story he told about a unique aspect of the project, something he originally thought best to leave out because he didn't think anybody would be able to relate to it. Heads all around the room were nodding. A question was asked, answered. Someone told a story about something similar that happened on one of her projects. Now that one person other than the presenter told a story, others came forward with their own stories. Before long it seemed like everyone was involved in the dialogue. More questions were asked, answered, asked, answered...; no longer was it one individual presenting to a room full of listeners, but an entire group of people sharing their own unique stories about their projects. The magical thing about this was that many of the lessons were similar.

Here is an excerpt of what transpired:

"We realized on this project the best way to save time and money was by holding weekly face-to-face meetings with our main contractor, and at times even more often."

"I've got some difficulties with this. It costs a lot of time to travel back and forth. I tend to believe you can accomplish an awful lot by just being smarter in how you use email and phone conferencing."

"Hold on now. I've got to say something about this. I've also found on my projects it was the face-to-face time that made the biggest difference. This is especially crucial at the beginning of the project, and also any time a major contractor joined the team. What I've found in cases like these is that face-to-face interaction prevented misunderstanding from occurring and helped build trust. Sure it costs some time and money on my part, but without it I don't know how we would have stayed on schedule."

"And I've found no matter how much time you spend composing them, emails always just make you aware of the tip of the iceberg. Projects don't sink because of the dangers you see ahead of you. It's the stuff below the surface that does the most damage, and by actually going out and talking to people you learn how big and dangerous those issues really are."

Our project manager standing at the front of the room felt more like a facilitator than a presenter, but that was okay with him. What he was hearing sounded good, it sounded right, and for the first time in a week he recognized this as the feeling he had brought home from these meetings in the past.

"This presentation and our dialogue illustrate an important lesson for us all," said

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one of the project managers at the table, and lo and behold, to our project manager's amazement, it was the colleague whom he flew in to the meeting with from his center. "For me it's an especially important lesson. Why? Because I didn't have much faith that I could learn anything at this meeting. I don't know every detail about people's projects, but the thing that strikes me is that these stories have gotten me to think about my own project in a way I hadn't been able to before. Thinking, pondering, reflecting, this is all great. To be perfectly honest, I don't think I've thought this much about my own decisions and actions since I asked my wife to marry me 20 years ago."

The room got very quiet. No one quite knew what to say, until the same project manager who made the observation stood up and rallied everyone, "Come on, let's get on with things. Doesn't anybody have a story to tell?"

When our project manager who had given the presentation returned to his seat, the first thing he wanted to do was write down everything said during the dialogue. He had learned so much. But before he could do that, and no sooner had he reached his chair, the editor of ASK was already on top of him, imploring him to submit his presentation as a story for publication in ASK. Publish it in ASK—what a fabulous idea! ASK is sent to all the project managers in NASA. Instead of sharing his story with just 15 project managers, he could make it available to the entire Agency, and, for that matter, the entire world, ASK being on the web.

Never before had the project manager fancied himself a writer, but the material was apparently good, all those people were nodding, the ASK editor was practically begging him; the stories about the project just seemed to come out of him so easily, why not write it down then?

Four months later, he was in the office one afternoon and got a phone call. It was his wife and she said she had to talk with him right away to tell him that she'd read his story in ASK and was moved by it. "I have a much better appreciation now of what you were going through to finish that project on time."

"There's something about a story that just appeals to the heart," he said.

"I'll say," she added. "What you wrote certainly isn't like that grocery list I helped you prepare. I mean you took a grocery list and turned it into a real meal."

Well, what was there to say after that? No matter whose praise came later, hearing this from his wife was like adding to the meal a bottle of fine wine.

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Lessons

- We need both face-to-face communication and virtual communication. Ambiguity is best dealt with by using face-to-face communication. This is true in project life and in knowledge sharing.

- A movie is more interesting than a slide show. Likewise, a story is more interesting than a bulleted list.

- Sharing a unique story with a group of peers will trigger other members of the group to share their own unique stories and will generate a productive dialogue.

- What is common to powerful stories is their uniqueness. Among other things, knowledge is about applying general principles to unique situations. Therefore, unique stories are powerful knowledge sharing vehicles.

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